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ABSTRACT

This ERIC digest explores aspects of post-modernism in art and art education. The adoption of post-modern attitudes by art educators must result in the generation of different, but no less difficult questions about the nature of formal education. Support for this argument comes from recent art education publications supplemented by relevant, but more general, material about post-modernism. A 9-item list of references is included. (Author)

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Post-Modernism, Art Educators, and Art Education

by Ronald N. MacGregor

This Digest explores aspects of Post-Modernism in art and art education. It is argued that the adoption of Post-Modernist attitudes by art educators must result in the generation of different, but no less difficult, questions about the nature of formal education. Support for this argument comes from recent art education publications supplemented by relevant, but more general, material about Post-Modernism in other publications.

What Characterizes Post-Modernism? Post-Modernism holds that many value positions may be taken about relationships among persons, art, and education and many of these positions are likely to be in conflict. Art works are constructed out of social interactions and indeed are designated "art works" by those elements in society that sponsor them. These works may receive confirmation as being important to a group through deconstruction (or taking apart, particularly from the standpoint of motive or agenda) and reconstruction (or interpretation) by their advocates' position, in which case their reconstruction of the same material will inevitably be different.

Post-Modernism thrives on these differences, which are as evident in artifacts as they are among individuals. *Bricolage*, the habit of using whatever comes to hand, and eclecticism, the deliberate plucking of elements out of their original contexts and bringing them together arbitrarily, are common post-Modern traits. Ambiguities and surprises are sought, together with multiple references. The audience may be confronted with paradoxes arising from unlikely choices of material, or from allusions to discrepant periods in art history, or from cultural contradictions. For example, the post-Modern sideboard may be constructed from slate and fiberglass; be shaped like a high alter, but cater to eating and drinking; it may have polish of a Louis XV table, but the eccentric proportions of Dr. Caligari's cabinet.

Charles Jencks (1986) has written extensively on the architectural interpretation of these features. Indeed, architecture provides some of the most striking illustrations of post-Modern thinking. Fragments from various periods are juxtaposed; architects quote from each other, and from their own work elsewhere.

A Post-Modern Curriculum. There is little comfort in all of this for the person who believes that history is marked by progress towards definable goals. Efland (1990) has written a text partly devoted to showing teachers how they might replace their faith in progress towards one set of goals with approaches that are closer to those of post-Modernism. His recent thinking contrasts the tools of Modernist criticism, their use directed to consensus, with those of post-Modernism, where the expectation is that critics will never agree. The post-Modernist puts trust in persuasive rhetoric, arguing from information rather than knowledge, and accepting that information is always provisional.

For the classroom teacher intrigued to know what a post-Modern curriculum would look like, Efland suggests abandonment of "grand narratives," with their emphasis on a unified conception of art, science, philosophy, and so on, in favor of "little narratives," extracted from personal insight and local experience. In classes that are increasingly multicultural in any case, this means consideration of alternative points of view, with particular attention to minorities and gender issues. It means realizing that art, present as it is in different situations for different reasons, will provide material for discussion and sharing, but not for resolution in absolute terms. Subject matter will pay less attention to distinctions between high art and popular art. Art history is not to be considered solely as progress in stylistic unfolding, but, in addition, as an arena where questions of meaning are generated and discussed. For example, Australian aboriginal ancestor figures and the Sisteine Chapel ceiling deal with the common question "Where did we come from?" The different times and circumstances in which each was created show the topic to be at once recurring and unresolvable.

Curriculum Contradictions. Many of the points Efland makes are consistent with those features of post-Modern education articulated at a more general level by such writers as William Doll. Drawing upon the nature of scientific paradigms, Doll (1989) argues that post-Modern curriculum has a character best explained in biological terms. It is an open system, in which continual accommodation and adaptation occur. Its structures are complex and likely to become more so. Change, for the student, comes about not as the result of being fed information, but from developing and organizing one's own program.

When a program is actually an agenda, the open interpretations Doll calls for may bring their share of contradictions. Clahassey (1986) points out that Modernism was characterized in art by a drive to abstraction and in art education by a concentration on self-expression and creativity. She then claims "Discipline-based Art Education" (DBAE) as a post-Modern phenomenon, by virtue of its multiple content areas and the possi-

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bility of team approaches which these provide. Holt (1990), on the other hand, explicitly rejects DBAE as a movement based on accountability and authoritarianism: his evidence being DBAE's lack of attention to non-Western, folk, commercial, or popular art.

An even more striking collision of definitions occurs in articles by Moore (1991) and Zurmuehlen (1991). Moore notes that while the careers of Modernist artists tended to be solitary and marked by defiance of the "Establishment," post-Modern artists are happy to accept the fact of commercialism and to profit from it. Zurmuehlen's interpretations of the same phenomenon is that the impact of art is diminished when artists begin to think of their lives as "careers." The productive post-Modern artist is one for whom monetary exchange becomes a subject for investigation through art, rather than the reward for it.

Contradictions like these may be expected, given the instability of language as a mode of communication. That is a central theme in the writing of Jacques Derrida (1967), acknowledged as one of the formative figures in post-Modernism. Derrida's perplexity about the necessity and the inaccuracy of language is manifested in a state explored earlier by Heidegger, called *sous rature* (under erasure). A word *sous rature* is crossed out, yet remains legible. It will not do, but one cannot do without it. Meaning is always elusive, or problematic.

Derrida's ideas have direct bearing on post-Modernist art forms. Literary deconstruction stresses the ambivalence of language and the pervasiveness of metaphor rather than logic in the presentation of argument. There is an attempt to reveal the existence of paradoxical themes, hidden within the main argument until close reading brings them to light. Paralleling this approach, a post-Modern critic will be attentive to those clashes of context that are present in the work and will have explication, rather than reconciliation, in mind. For example, the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington is really two statements. One is the Wall, with its hundreds of names, swelling and ebbing in number as the war ran its course. The other stands close by: a group of three bronze figures of infantrymen, tense and alert. How are the two to be joined? Why are both necessary?

Implications for Education. One major strength of post-Modernism is that it forces educators to take note of voices often ignored in the establishment of educational priorities. The increasingly multicultural character of Western nations mandates an accommodative, elastic curriculum. Re-focusing on constituencies that are politically or socially invisible helps us get away from the monocular vision often attending centralized curriculum development.

Questions that post-Modern educators will have to address include: How may a program grounded in notions of fragmentation and *pastiche* provide the overarching perspectives needed to solve global crises? How will priorities be established and who will decide on the order in which these priorities are to be effected? How widespread are post-Modern attitudes and how might one promote them without falling into the essentialist trap of assuming those are the attitudes? Is it legitimate to educate a culture out of nationalist determinism, by doing so, diverse perspectives are reduced in a global sense?

References and ERIC Resources

The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system. They are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number are annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), which is available in most libraries. EJ documents are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most libraries by using the bibliographic information provided below.

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